



Colorado Department  
of Public Health  
and Environment

*“To protect and improve  
the health and environment  
of the people of Colorado.”*

# NEWS

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## **Public Cautioned About Skunks with Rabies**

DENVER-- The Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment has issued advisories to local public health agencies and veterinarians regarding eight confirmed cases of rabies in wildlife in the eastern part of the state—including seven skunks and one coyote – over the past year. Based upon the widely dispersed locations of these rabies-positive specimens, it appears that skunk rabies may be circulating in eastern areas of the state and potentially moving west toward the Front Range.

Health officials are advising pet owners to be sure their dogs' and cats' rabies vaccinations are up to date. The advice comes after lab confirmation in the past two months of four skunks with rabies: one in Kit Carson County, one in Yuma County and two in eastern Adams County (near Byers). Two of these skunks were involved in attacks on domestic dogs. In 2007, rabid skunks were reported from Prowers, Washington and Las Animas counties in eastern Colorado.

“We have been closely monitoring the skunk population after a coyote in Prowers County was confirmed to have had skunk rabies last June,” said John Pape, an epidemiologist with the department. “In cooperation with local agencies and the Division of Wildlife, we have increased surveillance in eastern Colorado to determine whether the skunk rabies is widespread.”

Having pets vaccinated is the simplest and most effective way to protect pets and family members from this deadly disease. Pet owners are encouraged to contact their veterinarian and get their pets up to date on vaccinations.

Additional precautions to prevent possible exposure to rabies include:

- Do not feed wild animals – this just brings them closer to your family

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- Teach children to stay away from wild or dead animals.
- Do not allow pets to roam freely as this increases the chance they may be exposed without your knowledge.
- Keep your pet's rabies vaccination current and maintain vaccination records.
- If a family member or pet has been bitten or scratched by a wild animal, if possible safely contain the wild animal in case rabies testing is needed. People with possible rabies exposure should consult with a physician without delay. Contact your veterinarian if your dog or cat is bitten or scratched by a wild animal.

In the past, isolated rabies cases in terrestrial animals have turned out to be a bat strain of the rabies virus, probably meaning the infected animal found and ate a bat, according to Pape. This was presumed to be the source of the infection in a rabid skunk found last year in Mesa County in western Colorado.

“But in eastern Colorado we are seeing the skunk strain of rabies circulating farther west than at anytime in the last 30 years,” Pape said. “The problem is skunks are highly efficient at transmitting rabies to other animals like pets.”

Rabies is a virus that affects the nervous system of humans and other mammals, resulting in a fatal disease. The virus is shed in the saliva of infected animals. People and animals get rabies from the bite of a rabid animal or contact with saliva from such an animal.

Pape said signs of rabies in animals include abnormal behavior such as nocturnal animals being active in the day, animals approaching humans or other animals, difficulty with walking or movement, and unusual animal sounds such as excessive bellowing in cows or hissing/chirping in bats. Such signs indicate the animal is ill. Some animals with rabies will be very aggressive (furious rabies) while others may appear almost catatonic (dumb rabies).

Skunks and other wildlife should not be handled. If a wild animal allows a person to approach and handle it, the animal is probably ill or injured and will bite in self-defense. A healthy animal usually will remain well hidden and avoid human contact. Suspected rabid animals should be reported immediately to the local public health or animal control authorities.